

# Motivation Symposium

## Keeping going through the holidays

*Welcome to the first in a new series of symposiums on motivating students!*

I thought it would be interesting to put a series of questions to a wide range of teachers, many of them very well known, and see what came back. As you will see, the answers are certainly varied, but always inspirational, practical and thought provoking. I am extremely grateful to all who helped in this rather unusual exercise, and would welcome any further contributions from readers of Piano Professional, so please feel free to write in with additional ideas and thoughts on what has turned out to be a fascinating subject, to say the least...

**What do you say to students before they leave you for more than a couple of weeks? Is there any 'magic advice' that you can say to parents or to the pupils themselves that could really help them not go completely backwards in terms of musical development over the forthcoming holiday?**

**John Humphreys** (Head of chamber Music, accompaniment and Deputy Head of Keyboard, Birmingham Conservatoire): 'Never let a day go by without touching the piano (Busoni). Attend as many live concerts as possible. Plan a programme of short/long term work and above all play the piano with pleasure!'

**Jenny MacMillan** (Suzuki teacher, writer and Piano Professional Editor, issue 13): 'Because of the Suzuki approach, in which the family provides plenty of support, several of your seven questions don't apply to my students. Parents are used to working at home regularly with their young children, so they are not totally dependent on lessons to keep practice going. Once the routine is set up, the same children know how to keep practising on their own when they are older. However, my own suggestions for keeping going during the holidays would be: Listen – Recommend students listen to plenty of good music. Favourite repertoire – Set slightly easier pieces for the student that they will want to play, that perhaps doesn't need so much 'teaching'. Suggest they play by ear, or improvise, or compose a piece. Charts –

Suggest parents organise a special chart for the holidays, with a reward when complete, such as a small gift or an outing (especially to a concert, ballet, or musical). Goal – Set a target for the beginning of the next term (first or second week of term) – plan an informal pupils' concert, or a "group lesson" at which five or six pupils (or even just two or three) play to each other. Holiday courses – Courses at the beginning of the holiday provide inspiration to practise through the holiday; courses at the end of the holiday motivate students to prepare through the holiday leading up to the course. Extra holiday lessons – It can be particularly difficult to pick up after a period away from home. It is useful if a lesson can be organised shortly after returning home, to include fun items such as playing duets with the teacher, and setting enjoyable items for the remainder of the holidays.

**Alison Beeson** (Associated Board Examiner and teacher at Chetham's School of Music): 'Unfortunately, even when well motivated, a lack of routine and structure to the day can make even the most enthusiastic and well meaning child arrive at bedtime to find they have not done the intended practice. Parents can play a vital role here in creating space and giving gentle encouragement rather than insistent nagging which can be deleterious.

A forthcoming concert, assessment, exam or competition can strengthen the will and need to keep working in a structured way. One of my pupils, when asked how he could be persuaded to spend more time practising during a holiday for a forthcoming exam, suggested bribery by chocolate – anything is worth a try!!! How wonderful it is to have pupils for whom personal achievement supplies the necessary motivation.

**Dina Parakhina** (pianist and RNCM tutor): 'As for the parents involvement, I try to distance them from the whole process as much as I can. There are no "magic words" as far as my experience goes (as in "one size fits all"), since each and every student (that is especially true with children) is different. Some can't wait for the holiday to start in order to ditch the piano altogether, while others actually look forward

to practicing while out of school. The thing that works best in my opinion is exciting and challenging new repertoire.'

**Simon Bottomley (teacher at Chetham's School of Music):** They should try to work early in the day so that they can still enjoy some of their holiday. Before they go on a break, I remind them how quickly our playing standards drop if we don't practice regularly, and how hard we can then have to work to bring our standard back up again!

**Carole Presland (pianist and RNCM tutor):** 'I try to set specific timetables of work for the holidays with those who I think will be less organised or motivated. I will ask them what they consider will be a realistic (and not exaggerated) amount of time they can spend as a contracted minimum practice time in their break and I will then try to suggest how to divide that block of time up to cover the learning of new works etc'.

### **What sort of work do you ask them to do over a holiday period?**

**Dina Parakhina:** 'I usually deliberately give them a pile of music to learn, knowing well that they will not learn it all, but they will be challenging themselves while trying'.

**Alison Beeson:** 'A variety of work but in manageable 'bite sized' chunks seems to work'. Basic note learning of new pieces after an introduction to the joys and pitfalls of the music, technically and musically, with ways to practise the awkward corners. Memorisation of pieces well under way. Polishing of more established repertoire, developing the imaginative side.

Listening tasks – see 3. Sight reading – space and time to explore anything and everything in all idioms'.

**Maxine Windsor (well known piano teacher in Dumfries with a thriving private practice):** 'I say 'Have a lovely time' wherever they are going. To a very new beginner I offer a refresher lesson or two to keep them going, especially if their faces fall when they realize there are no more lessons for six weeks! so it's ' would you like a little lesson to keep you going in the holidays, or will you be OK? Let's see your mum about it' (if it's affirmative) To parents: 'When they are bored, ask them to play you something they've already know and you both enjoy, or ask them to play a duet with you'. 'Don't worry about nagging them to practise; save that for the term time.'

**Simon Bottomley:** 'I ask them to learn as much new and exciting repertoire as possible, and assure them that a school holiday period is an excellent time to make up for all the practise you haven't been able to do during the term time'

**Carole Presland:** 'I frequently ask people to think about the technical work we have been doing over the term and to revise and consolidate that work, considering carefully what we have been trying to achieve (and what actually has been achieved!) with the exercises set. Very often I will be setting them new repertoire to learn over the holiday period, but I always try to look at this with them before they go away and I suggest specific practice techniques to help them develop these works at an early stage. I ask them what their learning strategies will be'.

**Beate Toyka-Wilmhurst (teacher and concert pianist now based in Derby):** 'You can encourage learning to play a piece he knows from music only from memory in the holiday. You can list repertoire pieces and/or make a **Lucky Dip** of these and encourage asking friends and family to use the LD in the holidays. Ask the parent to 'reward' each LD-concert

with a golden coin, chocolate or metal, or any other item the child is especially keen on!

It might be a good idea to **pre-empt** the first lesson after the holidays in the last lesson before and talk about the challenges and expectations of the following term. It would be good also to encourage the pupil to voice any worries he may have. So often children are made to feel that they only do well if they win distinction grades, win in competitions and do "well" in their teachers' eyes - but questions and worries may not always be addressed enough...'

**Peter Lawson (pianist and teacher at Chetham's school of Music):** 'I would certainly suggest choosing user-friendly repertoire – works which can be subdivided, perhaps a set of variations rather than a large sonata. A few varied works rather than one massive one. Works which are less likely to be mislearned (eg with complex fingering issues) and with classic pitfalls clearly marked before the holiday. Most importantly, choosing repertoire which the student wants to learn (given the choice, this should hardly be an issue for pianists)'.

### **If the student is unable to get near a piano at all for more than a few weeks, what do you advise them to do?**

**John Humphreys:** 'not worry about it – a break is often as good (and usually better) than continuous practising. The mind is often 'cleansed' of bad habits usually formed by mechanical and mindless repetition'.

**Alison Beeson:** 'Periods without an instrument can be spent in listening to music played, other works by the same composers, especially for different instruments and forces to develop a more global knowledge of the composers' music. Also listening to as wide a spectrum of music as possible benefits in so many ways. Rhythm work – complex or more simple in the early stages is so beneficial worked at away from the piano. Memorisation work – writing out pieces, thinking through each note of a piece, hearing it in your head. Some resourceful parents/pupils have borrowed keyboards or found friends/neighbours willing to share their piano'.

**Dina Parakhina:** 'Music can still be present in one's life, even if the musical instruments are absent. Sometimes spending time away from the instrument can be used to get a better grasp of the many other aspects of the repertoire one has to prepare (e.g. in case of having to play a Beethoven sonata I would suggest to get to know his symphonies and chamber music works better, especially from the corresponding period), perhaps to even do some light academic research'.



**Simon Bottomley:** 'Keep your fingers moving; Use a table top to practise your exercises on as well as playing through your pieces. Work on trying to memorise pieces in your head, one hand at a time and then together, visualising the fingering as well as the notes'

**Maxine Windsor:** 'Some theory if appropriate; if advanced, table top exercises, or Gehrig's 'holiday' exercises; go into a quiet corner to read, and inwardly hear and play scores they have taken away with them, if they have a performance scheduled for just after the long holiday'.

**Carole Presland:** 'I also encourage them to think about memory strategies away from the keyboard, perhaps doing some work like the analysis of a Fugue, or discovering and writing down the structure of something they are playing – a Sonata movement. For example. I do tell them all the time that this work is, of course, as valuable as any time spent at the instrument. I challenge them to see what they can learn given these objectives – eg on a long plane trip back to Hong Kong, or similar!'

**Peter Lawson:** 'I don't really accept this. Most students can get near a piano if they put their (or parents) mind to it. An electric piano is a realistic alternative for initial note-learning, if not for subtle performance of Chopin nocturnes. Purists will SHOUT in horror but I have used a 2-dimensional roll-up keyboard (size of 2 video cassettes with 'flat' black keys) for note-learning purposes whilst holidaying on remote Scottish islands! Cost: c.£30 from Maplins. Of course practice is possible on the top of a no.37 bus'.

#### ***How do you recommend students 'reconnect' technically, musically, emotionally and with concentration to the piano after an extended break?***

**John Humphreys:** 'Slow technical work; develop a greater awareness of the physical relationship to the instrument – posture, breathing, etc'.

**Alison Beeson:** 'This can be tricky without contact with the pupils but again parents can play a big part. Self motivation is needed, aural commitment to music perhaps the easiest way initially, remembering how joyous music is. It is important always to ease back gently and slowly with seemingly manageable chunks of work.'

**Dina Parakhina:** 'For a short time go back to what they know well, repertoire-wise. It's the best path to recovery'.

**Simon Bottomley:** 'After an extended break they need to gradually build up their practise time again, starting with a few of their exercises played slowly and not too loud. They should be careful to remain as relaxed and flexible as possible. Slow work on a favourite piece can rekindle their enthusiasm'

**Maxine Windsor:** 'Technical: warm-up/circulation exercises in the middle of the floor away from the piano; arm swinging, fist clencing etc. etc. Musical: play to them. Often no classical music at all has been heard in the holidays. Emotional: as above; and ask what kind of mood did the music invoke. Concentration: play the pieces they are/have been doing and get them to spot mistakes'.

**Carole Presland:** 'For me the answer to this would be structured reintroduction to practice. Again I think that listening to others, eg. listening to concerts given by their peers at college when they return for a new term, usually acts as stimulation and motivation'.

**Beate Toyka-Wilmhurst:** 'It will be difficult and depends on how deep their love for the instrument is in the first place and (see above!) how much time they have spent at the piano in the break. Are they excited to start back again? (No problem). Worried? Burdened? It will be good to start the first lesson with a piece in their repertoire that they know well and have had some 'warning' of that this will be part of their lesson. Some simple black note improvisation loosens up and is fun to re-enter the piano world...You can make up a story relating to the situation (worried child tiptoeing in: soft pp walking bass. Teacher sits on creaky chair: cluster." How was your holiday?":rising whole tone scale. Child tells of water adventures, walks, sleeps, planes, etc and can be encouraged to improvise on these) Ask child about expectations for coming term. In every other work or learning environment this forms part of an agreement and can do so also in a piano lesson. You can discuss the questionnaire you may have handed out at end of the previous term. Play a fun duet together to help him realise he can still sightread!! If a pupil has agreed and you have their numbers or email address you could send a text or email about a week before she is due to come back for her first lesson, sending her a reminder and signal, in a humorous way if possible that you are about to start the wondrous world of work again and intend to do it together - happily!'

**Peter Lawson:** Switched on students will not have disconnected! To a large extent others will be swept along by the school, college or university environment (a major 'plus' for institutional learning). Private pupils will need a clear set of objectives (festival, concert, exam, audition etc').

#### ***What tends to happen in the first lesson back after a long break?***

**John Humphreys:** 'the need to recover technical and interpretative confidence – survey the results of new repertoire reading during the summer and advise on the practicalities of taking on what might seem to be over ambitious choices'

**Dina Parakhina:** 'Whatever disaster awaits the teacher, encouragement is crucial'.

**Simon Bottomley:** 'We would start talking about their holiday, what their next goals are, and then I would start working through a number of exercises in their warm-up routine, slowly and carefully. Repertoire follows.'

**Carole Presland:** 'First lessons back vary greatly. In the case of some students I often feel the break has done them good. They have thought about their own playing, drawn on their bank of knowledge more efficiently than usual and have also missed their lessons and the college environment, returning to it with far more enthusiasm than they left with at the end of the previous term. With others a drift has occurred and many have become despondent at losing momentum. Quite often they need to be brought back to reality with a jolt, being set new short term goals again. Basically it is a case of reawakening the various senses of these students so that they go away with renewed enthusiasm and batteries charged'.

**Beate Toyka-Wilmhurst:** 'I have had one or two pupils give their notice on the day or day before their first lesson after the long summer holiday. I believe in this case this was due to the fact that I hadn't given any thought to the holiday period and that there had been no contact between the parents and me during the holidays. A contract (such as the EPTA

contract) is a good help to counteract this happening lightly and it gives scope to discuss with the parents that this subject ("Help!!!! want to give up!") is likely to arise at one stage or another and to not give in lightly but explore every avenue to avoid this from happening.

**Peter Lawson:** 'I'd probably avoid a purely technical lesson in the first instance. Whatever work has been set, students do have a tendency to lean towards some pieces whilst 'forgetting' others. Understandable to some extent. However, expectations should be clearly understood by students and an agreed programme of work clearly written'.

**What are some of the 'moods' that you encounter with students after a long break from lessons? List the positive as well as the negative.**

**John Humphreys:** 'Lack of confidence having been so long away from their guiding force (the teacher) and the opposite – a greater sense of how to practise borne of having nothing to guide them except their own instinct and intelligence'.

**Alison Beeson:** 'There is often great eagerness to demonstrate what has been achieved in a holiday period and great pride in achievement too, which must be praised and encouraged even when results are not quite as expected or desired, so care is needed in adjusting playing without negativity.

Many students welcome a return to structure, routine and input in sorting out problems. They come with great enthusiasm and willingness.

The negatives are mostly a realisation that far more could have been done, and a rather sad feeling that they have let you down'.

**Dina Parakhina:** 'The biggest negative is again having to fix things that you thought were working'.

**Maxine Windsor:** 'I take notice of new interests for possible connection with repertoire, e.g. a visit to Spain, new sports, etc. Then we decide on the way forward, next goal, etc., and this goes on a list stuck on the piano. Positive: Ready to get on with it; glad to be back in routine after the long break. Negative: 'My mum says I haven't touched the piano in the holidays so I should give it up.' A negative attitude in an adult usually involves not coming at all and phoning to say they just haven't got time to do it any more, or whatever. If they do come but have no time, you usually can't do much about it, except in the short term by saying 'let's treat the lessons as practice sessions and see how we go'.

**Carole Presland:** 'Again, variable moods. Often there are positives: a sense of independence, a better sense of perspective (by which I mean they have got the environment and pressures of college into perspective), renewed inner confidence (related to the last point perhaps?). On the negative side: some students realise they have stood still, they regret their time wasting, they feel they have stopped listening to themselves, they have lost the thread'.

**Peter Lawson:** 'Post-holiday moods might range from fresh-faced enthusiasm to low self-esteem or apprehension. An ideal teacher will also be a performer who has felt both extremes and will be able to share their experiences with students and assert a sense of perspective'.

**Can you suggest any 'cures' that will enable focus to return after a holiday?**

**John Humphreys:** 'Fire up the imagination by listening to some of the great pianists playing – particularly the repertoire the student is dealing with'.

**Alison Beeson:** 'The longer I teach the more I realise how much sensitivity is needed to the whole picture – the circumstances, abilities, strength of character and commitment, self esteem, sense of fun, goals and many other aspects, perhaps going beyond this remit but I feel very strongly that identification and empathy with our pupils and a constant quest to encourage and problem solve with our students will produce many many ways of enhancing and encouraging what they do'.

**Maxine Windsor:** 'Show the student a stack of music (single sheets as well) with appealing titles for them to choose, and then demonstrate. Make it a fun time. Also ask if they have heard anything they want to play. Check if we have to work on anything for school. The focus soon comes back'.

**Simon Bottomley:** 'Finding an exciting piece from the start helps enormously, as does finding performance opportunities in the near future for them. They need to have goals'.

**Carole Presland:** 'Perhaps there is a need to reconnect with music first, the piano second. Most students are playing because they love music and sometimes their struggles with the instrument get in the way of this, particularly in more difficult times. That is why attending concerts, classes and so on is so important. It re-motivates and stimulates students'.

**Peter Lawson:** 'Begin oboe lessons. After that playing the piano will be a dream!'

Finally **Christine Brown** generously offered the following, which summarises much wisdom in only a few words: 'I have no "magic advice". Most of my child pupils work very hard during the term and need a break from the concentrated routine, so I do not expect regular work during the school holidays. Nevertheless I give several books for sight reading (NOT exam tests, but real music) and I also suggest that they play studies and pieces which they have learned in the past. Revising the studies keeps up their technique and revising the pieces keeps up their repertoire. After a long break the younger ones are eager to start again, but some teenagers may be lethargic. The "cure" is a piece they like and really want to play.' ■

## 2007 MORAY PIANO COMPETITION

Elgin Town Hall, Moray, Scotland  
10th & 11th November 2007

Adjudicators:  
Martin Roscoe & John Byrne

[www.moray-piano-competition.co.uk](http://www.moray-piano-competition.co.uk)